Developing Cultural Understanding in Stability Operations:

A Three-Step Process

By Lieutenant Colonel
Prisco R. Hernandez

Captain Smith walks into Haji Yar Molavi's house to discuss the needs of students in the neighborhood's elementary school and the recent car bombing that occurred near the mosque. Haji Molavi had invited Captain Smith to his house because he was comfortable with their relationship. His son serves hot *chai* (tea), freshly baked bread and fruit.

Captain Smith is a bright, adaptable Artillery officer. As such, he tackles many sensitive issues that lie well outside the traditional areas of expertise of combat arms officers. He is willing to learn and has adjusted well to the various roles he must play in stability operations.

However, once the initial pleasantries are exchanged, Captain Smith and most of his fellow officers are unable to accomplish anything without relying on interpreters. This puts the captain and his peers in a position of disadvantage when dealing with local leaders.

Ideally, the captain would have all the language and cultural skills of "Lawrence of Arabia." Obviously, this exceptional level of linguistic and cultural expertise is unattainable without years of immersion in a foreign culture.

Does this mean that our officers and NCOs must accept their limitations and rely on contracted "experts" for such a crucial and sensitive part of their jobs in stability operations? I contend that this

The author with Pashtun children in a village near Gardez, Afghanistan, December 2004. Children grow up within a cultural context and a set of values—but they are open to change and fresh understanding.

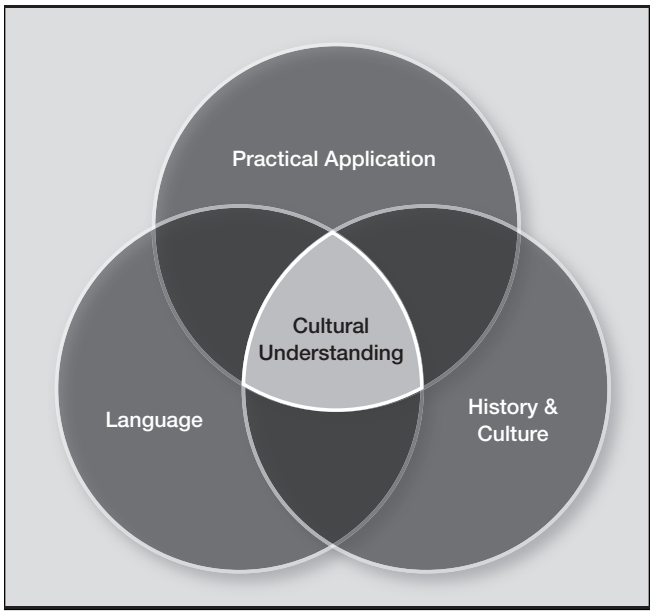

Figure 1: Three-Step Approach to Cultural Understanding

reliance on "outside help" is neither good for the Army nor something that must be accepted because any alternative would be "too difficult to implement."

There are many examples in the history of the US Army and other military forces where one person made a significant impact because of a superior level of cultural understanding.

Identifying a Training Need: Cultural Understanding. The Army recognizes that to succeed in today's contemporary operating environment (COE), cultural knowledge is not optional or "nice to have" but essential to mission success. This has been addressed in the Army's capstone manual *FM 1 The Army. FM 1* says, "Military professionals must be culturally aware—sensitive to differences and the implications those differences have on the operational environment."[1] Cultural training is now an integral part of pre-deployment training and applies to all Soldiers.[2]

In addition, the Army recognizes the value of skilled professionals who have a deep understanding of specific regions and countries, to include knowledge of the language. Due to the importance of the information environment and the requirements of stability operations, many Soldiers are in positions where a deeper knowledge of the culture in which they are working could increase their ability to accomplish the mission.

This deeper level of cultural understanding is clearly more than simple "cultural awareness" but does not reach the level of expertise required of an academic area expert. "Cultural awareness" is basic knowledge of a region and culture that includes social mores, religious traditions, customs and perhaps a few key phrases; "cultural expertise" is the deep knowledge acquired after years of cultural, linguistic and regional study, including practical experience, living and working in the target culture.

With those definitions, we can define "cultural understanding" as the "gray area" in between superficial familiarity and profound expertise. It is precisely this gray area that is critically important to military professionals engaged in stability operations.

A Three-Step Approach to Cultural Understanding. I propose a three-step approach that takes the student beyond mere cultural awareness to a deeper level of cultural understanding—from the level of merely avoiding causing offense to being an active and independent participant in the target culture.

The intent is not to make the Soldier a regional or cultural expert. Such expertise requires many years of sustained study and immersion in a culture. The program I propose would equip the Soldier with skills to operate with true understanding—not simply awareness. This understanding would come from purposeful study in three distinct, but related, cognitive areas: history and culture, language, and practical application. (See Figure 1.)

History and Culture. Knowledge of history and basic cultural understanding are, conceptually, the easiest to acquire. This knowledge involves a considerable investment of time in reading and thinking about the history and the society of the target region and country. It includes understanding the origins and development of the dominant culture or cultures of a region.

The student is exposed to the deep history of civilization in the target area. This enables him to take a long perspective on conflict, war and the cultural, intellectual and material achievements of the region or country.

To gain balance, he needs to view the history and culture through more than one perspective. Thus, the student must find the best books by prominent historians that offer contrasting views of the subject.

If the target culture is a non-Western one, the student should try to find a translation of a good history written by a historian from that culture. Even in cases where a native historian writes what is an evidently ideological version of history, for example, a Chinese Maoist history, it provides invaluable insights into a particular cultural ideology and serves as a balance against histories written from the "outside."

To successfully complete this step, the student should complete a core reading list that is supplemented by other choices, based on personal interest. This phase may be accomplished primarily by individual study evaluated in a final examination or essay that tests the student's grasp of the target culture.

Language Skills. The second step to cultural understanding is, perhaps, the most difficult—learning a language. Language is one of the most complex human constructs. It is a closely interrelated set of skills used not only to communicate simple thoughts to others, but also to describe reality and even transcend the material world by creating ideas.[3] This complex universe of communication is tied to the specific structure of each language.

There are many methods for language instruction. Most involve repetition and include verbal, visual and written instruction. Regardless of the method, the key to learning a new language is a positive attitude, regular, preferably daily, use of the new language and persistence over time. A concentrated period of weeks or months of "total immersion" is helpful as are methods that include native speakers of the language. The Army's initiative for web-based language training is a laudable step in making language training available to Soldiers.[4]

Other possible areas for exploration include forming partnerships with universities and colleges near military installations and partnerships with language programs used by the US State Department and other government agencies, and identifying Soldiers who speak the target language as resources for local programs, etc.[5]

Language is a set of distinct skills—understanding spoken language, speaking the language plus reading and writing it.

In addition, translation from English to the target language and from the target language to English are distinct skills. There are levels of proficiency in each of these aspects of linguistic expertise.

In his book *Travels in Afghanistan,* Jason Elliot provides an interesting insight into the difficulties of intercultural communications. Relating his conversation with an Afghan, he writes, "I was at a loss for many of these explanations even in English, let alone in my unpolished Persian (Farsi), and tried to find ways in which our worlds might overlap. I found myself not only translating from one spoken language to another, but across a gulf of meanings and significances, against which the business of words and their equivalents seemed straightforward.

"Again and again I felt thrown up against the ideological frontier dividing our universes. You can travel across continents to reach a different civilization, but the barrier of ideas that separates one culture from another remains as formidable as ever."[6]

Practical Application. The third step in achieving cultural understanding is the practical application of the student's cultural and linguistic knowledge within the target culture. The best way of doing this is to live in the target culture.

Thus, a Soldier studying Arabic should be assigned a tour in an Arab country. This would enable him to practice his skills and gain additional knowledge and understanding. Cultural immersion for an extended period of time is the best way for the student to progress from a mostly theoretical understanding of language and culture to practical application and internalization of the culture. However, this is not always possible.

Other venues for practical application include foreign exchange programs, participating in combined exercises as part of ongoing theater engagement plans and sponsoring student officers or NCOs from the target country as they participate in US military academic institutions. These and other creative ways may be used to ensure that Soldiers who study a particular language and culture can apply their knowledge with members of the target culture.

Understanding Civilizations and the Impact of Religion. A useful way of picturing the world is as a web of interlocking and, at times, conflicting civilizations. One such model of the world was proposed by Samuel Huntington in his influential book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.[7] The model is useful because it groups many cultures in larger civilizational spheres and creates a hierarchy that cuts across the sometimes arbitrary boundaries of nation states. Even if one does not accept every feature of his thesis, the Huntington construct provides a useful mental model for understanding the complex and sometimes violent interactions between distinct civilizations.

Interestingly, of all available cultural factors, Huntington uses religion as the most significant determinant of a civilization.[8] This is a more generic aspect than language because many languages are united under a single religion. Religion is a universal phenomenon.

Even the apparently atheistic or secular humanistic societies of the 20th century provided a secular ideological substitute—such as the communist state and associated dogma or the ideals of a liberal democracy and market capitalism. In any case, religion unifies a significant number of cultural characteristics and, thus, serves well as the basis for macro cultural differences.

To understand civilizations, the student studies the history of the area. Then he proceeds to a more detailed study of specific cultures or regions—with special emphasis on the religion or religions important to these regions.

Strategic Languages and Key Languages. The most critical decision for both individual Soldiers and the Army is what languages to study. Of the more than 6,000 living languages in the world, the Army only will be able to maintain expertise on a handful.[9]

The most useful languages to the Army are those that are predominant in areas of strategic or potential strategic interest, spoken by a significant number of native and secondary speakers, and the principal languages in their particular linguistic family. Languages that meet these criteria are "strategic languages."

Strategic languages are not only important in their own right, but as the dominant and most influential language in their family group, they also serve as a kind of "Rosetta Stone" for learning similar languages.[10] Thus, someone who knows Turkish may learn Azeri or Kyrgyz much faster than one who does not understand Turkish.

Languages with regional importance but that do not meet the criteria of strategic languages are "key languages." Key languages are important in their own right and may rise to the level of strategic languages, given the right circumstances.

A useful guide to strategic and key languages may be constructed by superimposing a linguistic map of the world over Huntingon's civilizational model. Taking the geographical combatant commands in turn, it is possible to determine the strategic and key niche languages in their areas of responsibility (AORs). (See the sidebar "Languages of US Combatant Command Areas of Responsibility.")

Interestingly, each major civilization is dominated by one strategic language

US Marine Corps Photo by Cpl Brian M. Henner, 1st Marine Division

MAJ Thomas A. Shoemake, 6th Civil Affairs (CA) Group, and CPT Chris T. Kuzio, A Company, 1st Battalion, 36th Infantry Regiment (A/1-36 IN), meet with Iraqis inside the Islamic Culture Center in Hit, Iraq, 14 March 2006.

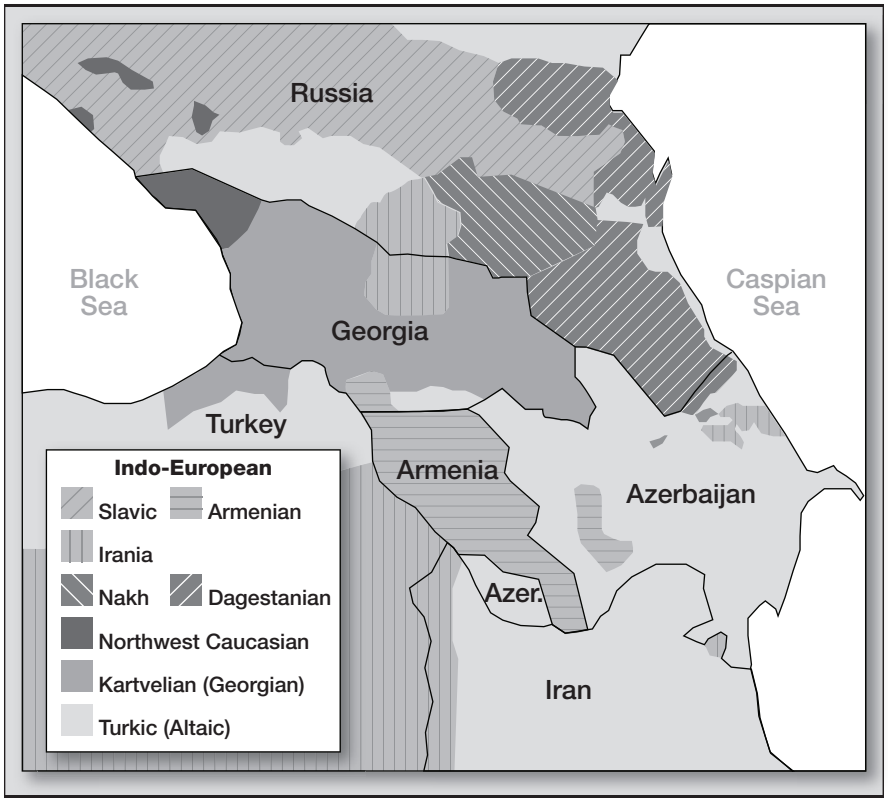

Figure 2: Language Groups in the Caucasus Region. (Source: http://linguistics.buffalo.edu/people/faculty/dryer/dryer/map.caucasus.gif)

with, perhaps, one or two additional strategic languages and a handful of important key languages.

Applying the Model. To see how the three-step model prepares Soldiers for a potential future situation, we apply it to the training scenario used at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) and the Battle Command Training Center (BCTP), both at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The scenario posits a crisis in the near future in the Caucasus region. This region has been identified as an area of potential conflict because of many unresolved differences based on ethnicity, historical animosities, natural resource scarcity and the instability that resulted from the breakup of the Soviet Union.[11] A simplified language map of the Caucasus portrays the degree of linguistic complexity in this region (see Figure 2).

Languages overlaid on the region can tell us a lot. There are more than 40 recognized languages in the Caucasus, most of which spread across national borders. However, only a few of these are spoken widely in the region. The Caucasus is home to three unique linguistic families that occur nowhere else in the world as

Languages in US Combatant Command Areas of Responsibility (AORs)

Central Command. In the CENTCOM AOR, Arabic, a language spoken from Morocco in the west to Iraq and Southwest Asia, will continue to be the dominant language throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Arabic includes several distinct and almost mutually unintelligible varieties of one basic language. However, modern standard Arabic is increasingly dominating print and broadcast media. Two other languages, Turkish and Persian (and their varieties), are very important in this part of the world.

Turkish is the principal language of Turkey—a member of NATO and the most advanced secular Muslim state. Many varieties of Turkish and the closely related Turkic languages are spoken in a wide belt extending from the Cyprus and the Balkans to western China. Related languages include Azeri, Khyrgyz, Uzbek and Khazak.

Persian, or Farsi, is the principal language of Iran and other neighboring areas. Mutually intelligible varieties of the language include Dari in Afghanistan and Tajik in Tajikistan. Even though Persia accepted Islam in the 7th century, it remains an alternative center of power within the Islamic civilization and has become the leader of the Shia branch of Islam.

Key languages in this area include Kurdish, the language of the Kurdish people, an Indo-European language closely related to Persian, and Pashto or Pukhtu, another branch of the family spoken widely in southeastern Afghanistan and the "tribal areas" of Pakistan.

Pacific Command. Traveling east from CENTCOM, Pakistan marks the beginning of the PACOM AOR. Urdu is the first strategic language encountered. Urdu counts more than 60 million speakers. Urdu is an Indo-European language and bridges Persian and Hindu.

Hindi, the language of 810 million people in the Indian subcontinent is another clearly strategic language. India includes no less than 415 living languages. Some of these may become important niche languages. These include Tamil in the south and Hindustani in the north.

In India, a former British colony, English is widely spoken and important as a language of media and technology. This is clearly an advantage for US forces called to operate in an Indian context.

Proceeding east into Southeast Asia, we encounter an area of enormous linguistic and cultural diversity and

well as other widely spoken languages, such as Turkish, Russian and Persian.[12]

If we rely on a base of Soldiers knowledgeable in strategic languages, we can readily see that Turkish, Russian and, to a lesser extent, Persian speakers provide a solid base from which to begin a cultural engagement with the Caucasus. As the situation develops, other languages and dialects will emerge as important key languages. Two of these—Armenian and Georgian (the latter included in the Kartvelian family)—have quite distinct linguistic identities as well as cultural histories.

Familiarity with the Islamic world, the Orthodox world and the historic legacy of the Soviet Union provides the cultural context. Situations of similar complexity could occur in the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and Africa. Indeed, cultural and linguistic complexity occurs especially in those areas that constitute Huntington's civilizational fault lines.[13]

Once a Soldier acquires a good cultural and historic background of his area of interest and a basic knowledge of the target language, he will be well on his way to cultural understanding. This understanding allows the Soldier to operate with considerable independence from an interpreter and gain stature with leaders and people in his area.

The Soldier can gain this level of understanding after one to three years of study, depending on the Soldier's abilities, effort and the degree of difference between the Soldier's own culture and language and the target area's culture and language. But it is the third step of the program—living and working in the target culture—that finally qualifies the Soldier as having true cultural understanding.

Soldiers who achieve a high level of cultural understanding must be rewarded for their efforts and used where their skills will benefit the Army. I propose the creation of a specific additional skill identifier (ASI) for these Soldiers and leaders. They should not be considered linguists but rather Soldiers whose level of cultural expertise will be used in the normal course of their duties—in the same manner as, say, airborne-qualified Soldiers are used.

Soldiers with this ASI would not take the place of linguists, whose duties are more specifically translation and interpretation of both verbal conversations and written material. Soldiers and leaders with the ASI for a specific culture would be employed throughout Army formations. Thus, our hypothetical Captain Smith would still be a 13A Artillery officer exercising his duties of fire support or as an information officer in stability operations, but he could exploit his cultural understanding, greatly enhancing his effectiveness in full-spectrum operations.

When the same captain is promoted to major and serves as assistant operations officer on a division staff, he would bring his cultural expertise and practical experience to the staff. In this way, the Army grows a new depth of genuine cultural understanding throughout its tactical formations and operational staffs.

In an era where the Army's main concern was to defeat the enemy decisively with overwhelming military might, investing the time and resources to reach cultural understanding was not possible. In today's COE, such investments are not only possible, but essential. As the Army continues to transform, cultural understanding has emerged as a critical force multiplier that may help achieve effects out of proportion to the effort invested.

complexity. Burmese, Malay, Javanese, Vietnamese and Khmer are all distinct and important regional languages. They all could become niche or even strategic languages, given the right circumstances.

Of these, perhaps Malay may be considered a strategic language. It is spoken by more than 30 million people as a primary or secondary language in Malaysia and Indonesia—where it is known in the latter as the Indonesian language for political reasons. Other languages spoken in the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos are closely related to Malay.

Chinese is undoubtedly the dominant strategic language, or more properly, family of languages, in East Asia. Chinese includes several closely related but mutually unintelligible languages. Of these, Mandarin Chinese, with almost 900 million speakers, is by far the dominant language of government, media and commerce in East Asia. Cantonese Chinese or Yue, the language of the southern province of Guangzhou, comes a distant second with 55 million speakers.

North of China, Russian remains the key strategic language of Central and Northern Asia.

Another strategic language is Korean. Despite the fact that it is rather narrowly circumscribed to the Korean Peninsula and adjacent areas, it is the language of the 'Two Koreas" currently engaged in a longstanding conflict that involves a nuclear standoff.

Finally, Japanese is an important niche language because of Japan's role as a close US ally in the Pacific region.

Southern Command. Proceeding to the Americas, Spanish is clearly the dominant strategic language of Latin America with the exception of Brazil and a few other small countries. Other important niche languages in SOUTHCOM's AOR include Portuguese, the principal language of Brazil, and French, which is spoken in French Guiana, Haiti and other Caribbean islands. Some of the many native languages could become significant in some circumstances.

European Command. EUCOM's AOR is the home of western culture and languages. In the 21st century four western European languages—English, Spanish, Portuguese and French—still retain strategic significance, primarily because of the legacy of colonialism or their importance in international media and technology. A fifth European language, Russian, remains an important strategic language because of the Soviet Union's geopolitical importance in the 20th century.

Niche languages, such as Serbo-Croat, become important because of regional conflicts. Ukrainian, Byelorussian and other Slavic languages are also important niche languages. As US forces establish bases in Eastern Europe, other languages, such as Polish, Romanian and Czech, will be important for liaison purposes.

Standard Arabic and its major regional variants comprise the strategic language of North Africa. Important niche languages in Africa include Swahili and Hausa, both of which serve as the language of commerce and social intercourse in East and West Africa, respectively. Omro is spoken widely in Sub-Saharan Africa. Amharic or Ethiopian is another important niche language.

As in India, English is an important secondary language in many parts of Africa, as are other former colonial languages—French, Portuguese and Afrikaans, an African variety of Dutch.

As in other parts of the world, other native languages may rise in importance under the right strategic circumstances.

Lieutenant Colonel Prisco R. Hernandez, Army National Guard (ARNG), serves as Director for Reserve Component Programs, ARNG, at the Center for Army Tactics in the Command and General Staff College (CGSC), Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He is a full-time Active Guard/ Reserve (AG/R) officer. Also at the Center for Army Tactics, he served as Assistant Professor of Tactics and as the Fires and Effects Instructor for the Combat Refresher Team. He also served as a Training Officer in the 4th Brigade, 75th Division (Training Support) at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and as the S3 in the 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery (1-120 FA), an M109A5 howitzer battalion in direct support to the 32d Infantry Brigade, Wisconsin Army National Guard. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. He won the prestigious national 2001 Distinguished Article Award from The Army Historical Foundation, Arlington, Virginia, for his 2001 History Contest Second Place article, "The Spanish Civil War: The German Kondor Legion, A Firepower Force Package in Combat." He recently was awarded the CGSC Silver Pen for the article "Mobilizing a Transforming Force: 32nd Division Redlegs in the Great War" that was published in the September-October 2005 edition of *Field Artillery.*

Endnotes:

1. *Field Manual 1 The Army* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 14 June 2005), 1-12.
2. An example of this culturally informed training is the incorporation of a realistic "villages" populated by role players native to Iraq or Afghanistan at the Army training centers, such as the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, and the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana.
3. Miriam Webster Dictionary defines language as "a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks having understood meanings" and dialect as "a regional variety of language distinguished by features of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation from other regional varieties and constituting together with them a single language <the Doric dialect of ancient Greek> b: one of two or more cognate languages <French and Italian are Romance dialects> c: a variety of a language used by the members of a group <such dialects as politics and advertising—Phillip Howard> d: a variety of language whose identity is fixed by a factor other than geography (as social class) <spoke a rough peasant *dialect*> www.m-w.com/dictionary. Linguists and ethnologists often have very technical definitions, but they are all subjective to some degree. In general, the difference between a language and a dialect has been best described by the aphorism cited by language scholar Max Weinrich, "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy." www.wikipedia.org/wiki/language-dialect_aphorism.
4. The Army recently launched an internet-based distance language learning program with the commercial company Rosetta Stone.
5. Certain methods of language learning emphasize expediency and practical issues. An example is found in A.G. Hawke's *The Quick and Dirty Guide to Learning Languages Fast* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 2000).
6. Jason Elliot, *An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan* (New York: Picador, 1999), 167-168.
7. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1996).
8. Ibid., 42. "Blood, language, religion, way of life, were what the Greeks had in common and what distinguished them from the Persians and other non-Greeks. Of all the objective elements which define civilizations, however, the most important is religion, as the Athenians emphasized. To a very large degree, the major civilizations in human history have been closely identified with the world's great religions; and people who share ethnicity and language, but differ in religion, may slaughter each other, as happened in Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and the Subcontinent."
9. According to the respected ethno-linguistic publication *Ethnologue,* there are currently 6,912 living languages; however, many of them are spoken by few speakers. *Ethnologue,* http://www.ethnologue.com/site_map.asp.
10. "The Rosetta Stone is a dark grey-pinkish granite stone (often incorrectly identified as basalt) with writing on it in two languages, Egyptian and Greek, using three scripts, Hieroglyphic, Demotic, Egyptian and Greek. Because Greek was well known, the stone was the key to deciphering the hieroglyphs." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_Stone.
11. Olga Oliker and Thomas Szayna, *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the US Army* (Santa Monica, California: Rand, 2003).
12. The indigenous language families of the Caucasus are Kartvelian or South Caucasian, Abkhaz-Adyghe/Abkhaz-Circassian or Northwest Caucasian, and Nakh-Daghestanian or Northeast Caucasian. Significant languages in the region include Georgian (a member of the Kartvelian family), Ossetic, Karachay-Balkar, Kumyk, Azerbaijani/Azeri, Tat, Talysh, Armenian and Urartean. Johanna Nichols, "An Overview of languages of the Caucasus," http://popgen.well.ox.ac.uk/eurasia/htdocs/nichols.html.
13. "…Central Asian and South Caucasus states remain institutionally weak. This increases not only the risk of strife…but also the danger of interstate conflict." Oliker and Szayna, *Faultlines of Conflict,* 29. "Fault line conflicts are communal conflicts between states or groups from different civilizations. The territory at stake is…a highly charged symbol of their history and identity...[for example] Nagorno-Karabakh." Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 252.

Editor Receives Katie Award for Interview with LtGen Sattler

Editor Pat Hollis poses with her Katie Award statue for "Best Magazine Profile/Interview of 2006" in the Southwest US. She received the award on 18 November 2006 at the black-tie optional gala at the Hyatt Regency in Dallas with more than 700 media personnel attending.

The award was for the interview "Second Battle of Fallujah—Urban Operations in a New Kind of War" with Lieutenant General John F. Sattler, USMC, commander of forces in the battle of Fallujah II, that appeared in the March-April 2006 edition. General Sattler discussed the integration of Phase IV stability and reconstruction operations into the Battle of Fallujah II in November 2004 that had some of the most intense urban fighting since the Battle of Hue City in Vietnam. The interview is online at sill-www.army.mil/famag/index.asp.

During the 2006 48th Annual Katie Awards ceremony, statues were presented in 150 categories for magazine and newspaper journalism, radio and TV broadcasting and public relations. There is some confusion about how the Katie Awards got started. One popular story is it was started by John A. Jackson, owner of the Katy Petroleum Company and longtime patron of the Dallas Press Club that now sponsors the awards. Jackson believed the name of the award, although only close in spelling, would be good advertisement for his company; in addition, his wife was named Katy.

The annual media competition is for a six-state area: Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Arkansas and Louisiana. The judges were from New York and Washington, DC.